

### Reds on *Reds*

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We often find ourselves intrigued with the variety of reviews of some popular films, and we have a special interest in the divergent range of left reviews. If nothing else, a comparison of Movement press response to REDS shows that radical critics have provided no single radical analysis of the film, but rather an extreme diversity. REDS offered a provocative example for investigation. Because it dealt with the left, had a good box office, and received the critical attention of New York critics, Directors Guild, and Academy Awards, the left press ran many reviews and letters.

In an article in *Working Papers* on the left press' reception of REDS, Linda Bamber accounts for the large, intense critical response by referring to "the scarcity of cultural self-images available to intellectual leftists, who are by definition outsiders to the dominant culture." Because of our thirst for dynamic self-images within the dominant culture, we respond, she says, to "Beatty's obviously sincere attempt to contribute to a cultural mythology of the left..."

We couldn't resist collecting reviews of the film once we found out that Ronald Reagan liked it (though he wished for a happy ending, according to the *New York Times*) and that the Communist Party, USA, editorially praised REDS and urged its supporters to see the film. In the film's own spirit, we have decided to present our own set of "witnesses." By way of comparison, we included a sprinkling of comments from the dominant press to show some recurrent similarities and differences in the way critics interpreted and evaluated REDS. For example, while everyone saw REDS as a love story mixed with political events which were meant to stir the audience, people reacted differently to its being that kind of romantic-political mixture.

#### ROMANCE

"I'm a romantic. I believe in moments when life shivers with a wild

intensity. I believe that Moscow snow just has to be whiter than starlight and that there's something exquisite and chilling about red flags billowing above all that white. I believe art and joy, rebelliousness and pathos are resources as valuable as labor and capital ... I loved the movie REDS. It inspired just the enthusiasm and caring that emerges from the best writing of Bryant and Reed ... The lives of Louise Bryant and John Reed are inspiring to me; their commitment and courage were of mythic dimensions. We need legends from our radical past, people to serve as models from whose failures and victories we can learn. I hope artists and writers will continue to weave tales from that history, for it is a story rich in drama and romance.” — Jack Manno, *Peace Newsletter*, publication of the broad-based Syracuse Peace Council

“It is first of all a romance — staple of all themes — and the years of political turmoil in which the story unfolds are meant to cast the romance into epic proportions. Otherwise, everything is ordinary: two people run after a Meaning in a chaotic world, going through the tensions that a couple who have definite ideas about what they should be (going] through, and trying to resolve the conflict between the demands of private life and the demands of the world. In the end, love triumphs and brings its poignancy. Tragedy comes in the shape of death. Are we summarizing REDS or Seagal's [sic] LOVE STORY? No matter, plot-wise, there is not that much difference.” — N.R., *Modern Times*, bulletin of the Hawaii Union of Socialists

“[Beatty's] gone and made a *movie*, a very long and satisfying romance wherein Reed's devotion to godless communism provides the most exotic of backgrounds for an old-fashioned love story that few moviegoers will have any difficulty recognizing or embracing ... Beatty had the intuition to see beyond the politics, to realize, first of all, how a patina of distance and romance would safely neutralize Reed's beliefs until he seems no more threatening than a Rotarian ...” — Kenneth Turan, *California*, a glossy regional magazine

“Jack has his ideals; she has him. When, near the end, the two meet up for the last time in a train station in Moscow, REDS allows us to discover — and feel — what is ultimately more important.” — Lawrence O'Toole, *MacLean's*, the Canadian newsweekly

“The picture glorifies Reed, and the picture prevails, the motion picture, Romance, Hollywood, True Love, True Confessions ... she's sorry now that she left him.” — Barbara Halpern Martineau, *Broadside*, a Canadian feminist newspaper

“This is a fascinating, extraordinary film for two reasons: first, for its beauty and political content; second, who really is this movie star Warren Beatty, and why did he make this daring, courageous pro-revolutionary film?” — Lester Cole, *People's World*, the West Coast Communist Party newspaper (Cole was one of the jailed and blacklisted

Hollywood Ten)

“Hollywood playboy Warren Beatty sees something of himself in John Reed: the unfulfilled artist. But Beatty lacks spine, sees women as transitory warm flesh, and thus tries to make the primary thing in John Reed's life his love with Louise Bryant ... Thus we get an otherwise hackneyed love story which would be simply trite without the backdrop of radicalism and revolution.” — A San Diego comrade, *Challenge/Desafio*, newspaper of the Progressive Labor Party, an Old Left sect

“To some extent there is an element of romance involved. When I read Vivian Gornick's *Romance of American Communism*, for instance, I think of how people really wanted to devote their lives passionately to a cause and get involved with it. Somehow the image that Beatty creates is some of what hooked me into politics. A lot of that sort of political life in the sixties involved both personal and political gratification. So the fact that Beatty decided to try to sell the left to the U.S. people, and do it by figuring out what it was that had hooked him onto it, was a good decision ... A great deal of it has to do with comradeship, adventure, and so on. That is certainly a lot of the appeal of it for me — that you give your life to it; and history is not under your control.” — Kate Ellis, in a transcribed discussion with others in *Socialist Review*, the reform socialist journal

## HISTORY AND IMAGE

Most of the left discussion of REDS concerned the film's portrayal of history, often comparing REDS with DR. ZHIVAGO. No one discussed the nature of historical drama or compared the film to other dramatic historical left films such as BATTLE OF ALGIERS or 1900, or socialist films such as OCTOBER or LUCIA.

“Politically perhaps the most significant thing about REDS is that it presents a powerful refutation of the anti-communist propaganda myth that the Russian revolution was a coup perpetrated behind the backs of the Russian people by a handful of Bolshevik plotters. REDS offers marvelous street scenes of Petrograd during the days when the Bolsheviks won political power — the ten days that shook the world. We see the indispensable ingredient of authentic revolution — the masses of people intervening decisively in the historical process.” — Harry Ring, *The Militant*, newspaper of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party

“At first, as we encounter soldiers and peasants standing at railroad stations, we get a sense of the pregnancy of the revolution. The Russian masses' yearning for peace has become a material force, and only the Bolsheviks have translated it into a political program. This motion soon climaxes in organized insurrection and undoubtedly all but the most politically stony-hearted will find themselves thrilling to the scenes

when a martial rendering of the Internationals orchestrates gal a mass workers' demonstration through the streets of Petrograd, culminating in the storming of the Winter Palace. For one magic moment, we are all revolutionaries!" — Irwin Silber, *Line of March*, Marxist-Leninist journal

"... the anti-capitalist, pro-Communist poison — cleverly dispensed by talented professionals, working with a fast-moving, literate script-drips off the silver screen. 'Property is Theft,' proclaims a note pinned to the front door of the protagonist's apartment in Greenwich Village ... The overthrow of the moderate Kerensky Government in Moscow by the Bolsheviks in October 1918 ... was apparently a spontaneous revolt of the masses, rather than a Communist conspiracy." — Robert M. Bleiberg, *Barrons*, the right-wing business newspaper

"The political discussions about socialism, communism and anarchism, which were clearly the questions of the day, are handled cynically, basically divorced from the class struggle. One exception is when Reed was in Petrograd: at a mass meeting on what sort of support could be expected from the international working class for the revolution, Reed spoke for the U.S. workers, saying that they were looking to the Russian masses for the example to seize power from the capitalists." — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

"... The plot turns into a winsome case of revolution-as-aphrodisiac as Reed and Bryant, working as (what else but) comrades, discover they're still sweet on each other. One scene is especially memorable: after Reed makes a rousing speech to a hall full of burly workers, his audience, as burly folk are wont to do, rush forward and overwhelm him with hearty congratulations. Reed suddenly looks up and favors Bryant with the most pleasingly self-deprecating of shrugs. It's pure movie corn, a page from a Harlequin novel for intellectuals, but it is as irresistible to us as it is to her." — Turan, *California*

"REDS tries to demonstrate that Reed's romantic attachment to the revolution has distorted his sense of reality. The point is established in a scene at a workers' rally. Tension is in the air. The revolution is imminent. The debate over whether or not to seize power is raging. Enthusiasm for the revolutionary moment is building lip in the crowd when Reed is suddenly propelled to the platform. The 'American comrade' is asked to speak. Reed responds with a passionate — but to a contemporary audience, completely absurd — pronouncement that the workers in the U.S. are themselves chomping at the bit of revolution and are ready to join their Russian brothers as soon as the signal is sent from Petrograd. The crowd thunders its approval. By itself the incident can be explained as an excess of the movement. But in the context of the film — and in view of all that follows — it subtly establishes that Reed's political judgments are not to be trusted. After all, love is blind, and we do not

think less of the lover for this universal weakness. To underscore the film's view that Reed's attachment to the revolution is composed more of romance than perceptiveness, the incident culminates in the sexual reunion of Reed and Bryant, likewise tumultuously orchestrated by the *Internationale*.” — Silber, *Line of March*

“[Beatty) still found enough artistic detachment to make his Reed into a flawed, fascinating enigma instead of a boring archetypal hero. I liked this movie. I felt a real fondness for it. It is quite a subject to spring on the capitalist Hollywood movie system, and maybe only Beatty could have raised \$35 million to make a movie about a man who hated millionaires. I notice, here at the end of the credits, a wonderful line that reads: ‘Copyright MCMLXXXI *Barclay's Mercantile Industrial Finance Limited*.’ John Reed would have loved that.” — Roger Ebert, *Sun-Times*, the daily Chicago newspaper

“When REDS got an R rating, Beatty appealed that decision, arguing that, despite the strong language, his movie reclaimed an era of American history that every schoolchild should see. The movie was subsequently given a PG, and as exhibitors left the appeals hearing, they approached Beatty individually and said they were proud to be showing the picture.” — David Thompson, *California*

“Beatty is clearly fascinated by the tension in Reed between the artist-rebel and the revolutionary who decides for the disciplined vanguard party against his temperament ... REDS is something of an anti-ZHIVAGO whose hero resolves his conflict between private and public life with an ever deepening political commitment. Thus many reviewers like the movie despite its political background. We like REDS because of it.” — Pat Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*, newspaper of the left-Trotskyist Spartacist League

“I'd like to speculate that possibly the film's deepest sympathy lies in the revolt against the bourgeoisie, not as a political revolt, but as a bohemian one ... Beatty had been obsessed with Reed's story for fifteen years, and it can't be for the revolutionary politics. It has to be for the nature of the man, Reed, the nature of that kind of romanticism, the nature of that notion of individuality, that spontaneity.” — Leonard Quart, *Socialist Review*

“And even if the movie takes care to say that revolution would not work in America, there has never been a major motion picture that makes a communist so attractive.” — Thompson, *California*

“It's not clear from the narrative that anything has been worthwhile. It is rather as though, if the revolution fails, all has, indeed, been lost.” — E. Ann Kaplan, *Socialist Review*

SIGNIFYING ABSENCES

While any collection of excerpts may trivialize the arguments, as we found reviews of REDS with distinctly different opinions and compared them, we realized that although in some cases the reviewers' politics obviously correlated with their interpretation, in fact the two did not always mesh. Perhaps we could have more systematically found such correlations by comparing the publication's political line and its reviews (maybe starting with the two largest left newspapers not dealt with here — the independent radical *Guardian* and the social democrat *In These Times*). As we continued collecting reviews, we found distinct differences in what people picked up on in the film, what they thought worked or didn't work, and what they thought the film left out.

“The movie never succeeds in convincing us that the feuds between the American socialist parties were much more than personality conflicts and ego-bruising, so audiences can hardly be expected to care which faction is “the” American party of the left.” — Ebert, *Sun-Times*

“The film deals with subject matter virtually unknown to the U.S. public. The viewing audience is exposed to ideas about party-building, Comintern strategy, the conflict between anarchism and Bolshevism, and the movement in the United States against World War I ... Back in the U.S., Reed becomes a full-time activist in the Socialist Party. This is one of the most interesting parts of the film. The left-wing of the party splits off ...” — M.V., *Modern Times*

“For members of the audience not informed about the events, it must be particularly difficult to comprehend the condensed and sometimes simplistic depiction of the split in the Socialist Party, and the two communist parties that emerged from the split. This is so even though the film stays quite close to what actually happened.” — Ring, *The Militant*

“The political arguments, though condensed, are powerful, as Beatty has his hero answer the best arguments of his opponents.” — Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*

“Reed's role in U.S. communist politics reveals nothing so much as the inconsequential squabbling characteristic of the left, its total irrelevancy to U.S. life, and its complete dependence on Moscow.” — Silber, *Line of March*

“The film showed Reed's group as the dominant left-wing group in the Socialist Party. In fact it was a small minority within the left wing of the SP. Had his group waited one more day and met with the majority left-wing members of the SP at the founding convention of the CP, no such split would have occurred. None of the facts clutter the film. The Comintern is accurately shown directing both parties to suspend any differences and merge.” — David E. Massette, *People's World*

“During this we see him in a discussion with Emma Goldman, the anarchist-to-the-end, a refugee, hating Moscow and the Revolution. Patiently (and beautifully played by Beatty) he explains simply what she cannot accept, about struggle and growth.” — Cole, *People's World*

“Reed never told Goldman to stick with the failing revolution. “Otherwise what does your whole life mean?” — these words are taken, significantly, from the closing speech of the renegade Bolshevik Nikolai Bukarin, explaining at his 1938 trial his confession that he conspired with Trotsky against the U.S.S.R.” — A New Jersey Comrade, *Challenge*

“But the film is more than superficial — at the critical junctures it makes the wrong political choices. Incredibly, we hardly see a single capitalist during the whole movie, and the real horrors of capitalism — the wars, the racist lynchings, the poverty, the cultural and moral bankruptcy — are never vividly exposed. In contrast, the main villains of REDS turn out to be the reds themselves.” — Eric Michaelson and Mark Rosenbaum, *Unity*, Paper of the U.S. League of Revolutionary Struggle (M-L)

“One weakness of the film REDS is the near absence of the working class, except for a few brief scenes. Without them there is little understanding of the essential motivation of Reed's life. Reed and Louise Bryant did not go to Russia just because it was a ‘good story.’” — Chuck Idelson and Michael Stephens, *People's World*

“... I would like to reflect what I think should be the obligation and requirements of film reviewing, for a working class newspaper and an unusually large working class conscious audience. Does its overall reality, despite its weaknesses, provide humanism in its presentation, convey some semblance of the class struggle? Does the producer serve the interests of peace and justice? It is necessary to see REDS in the light of the artistic honesty of Warren Beatty, and whether he sincerely and truthfully produced a work of art. That this artistic endeavor comes at a time when nuclear war and anti-Soviet, anti-Socialist, anti-Communist hysteria is being peddled by all the media, lifts his work into the realm of art. Because it portrays the life of a Communist, John Reed; uses real live Communists as 'witnesses'; debunks 64 years of anti-Sovietism and captures the fervor of the most exquisite moment of history; makes a hero out of a Communist, and does this all with originality, imagery and beauty, this is art.” — Jerry Atinsky, *People's World*

## LOUISE BRYANT

After REDS it presumably will be impossible for leftists to dismiss Bryant as simply a nameless "girlfriend" (as Lee Baxandall did in a 1968 article). But if Bryant gets inserted back into history by way of a movie, this has raised a number of questions about the historical woman (Was her writing inferior? Was she flaky, as Emma Goldman claimed?) as well

as about Diane Keaton's star image ("Annie Hall joins the revolution"), and the character's narrative function as a woman who sacrifices herself for a man.

“At the same time there is a constant 'distracting' from the political issues through the focus on Louise. For instance, in the scene in Louise's studio, shortly after she and Reed have met, Reed's political ideas are garbled in order to rush us through the question of whether or not they will go to bed. I was really into what Reed had to say, but obviously, from the way the scene was cut, one was not meant to hear. The whole scene is geared toward the sexual relationship. Again, in the important scene where Reed and his group are trying to take their legitimate seats in the Socialist Party Convention, the camera keeps cutting to Louise's emotional reactions, pulling us constantly back to her personal feelings and away from the politics.” — Kaplan, *Socialist Review*

“The first time I saw REDS I was excited by the scene where, as Reed quarrels with the leader of another leftist splinter group, there is a recurrent close up of Louise Bryant looking shocked, and she soon leaves the meeting. In the next scene she tells Reed how idiotic is for two small groups, neither of them representative of the American working class, to fight in this way; that Reed's best talents are as a writer, not as an organizer; that he should stay home and write, not go to Russia again to claim recognition for his group. Her argument is compelling, and I was delighted to see the emphasis given her by the film. I was puzzled when the film proceeded to set up Reed as a hero in the face of all comers. Seeing REDS again, I realized how much of a setup it is. In the argument scene, Bryant/Keaton is dressed in a housecoat. She's disheveled, almost hysterical, begging Reed not to go, playing the role of possessive, irrational wife she has played before. Reed/Beatty is immaculate in suit and white shirt, composed, determined, unwavering in his obsession.” — Martineau, *Broadside*

“Louise Bryant didn't need Jack Reed to inform her of free sex. She had been doing it, unabashedly in public, since she was a sophomore at the University of Oregon.” — Laura Cottingham, *Soho News*, the NYC hip newsweekly

“There is something unpleasant about the characterization of a liberated woman as, first of all, being sexually free. One may ask why, whenever one talks about liberation in relation to men, it is immediately equated with political or economic freedom whereas whenever the subject is raised in connection with women, the expected reply is: ‘I'd like to see you with your pants off, Mr. Reed.’” — N.R., *Modern Times*

“Some people have criticized the portrayal of Bryant because historically she handled the whole issue of monogamy and sexual freedom with a great deal more aplomb than is presented in the movie. I myself find it very hard to identify with the idea of having multiple relationships and



simply moving on from one to the next without any difficulty. Many women would have difficulty in relation to that kind of character.” — Ellis, *Socialist Review*

“... his wife Louise Bryant, a self-indulgent petite-bourgeoise who is constantly ridiculing Reed and trying to hold him back .... He is shown engrossed in his personal troubles with his wife, reminiscing about the past, while the streets are filled with red soldiers and workers, jubilantly defending the revolution.” — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

“It seems that in order to be independent, she has to be kind of querulous and she has to say the usual feminist thing, ‘You're not giving me support for what I'm trying to do.’ But that plugs into something that's around in American culture already. Similarly there's that whole thing with the cooking where he's spilling things all over the place; he's the kind of guy who's read ‘The Politics of Housework’ and is giving it a try, so to speak.” — Ellis, *Socialist Review*

“Beatty as Reed and Keaton as Bryant seem like spoiled adolescents playing with avant-garde radicalism rather than committed revolutionaries. The sexual politics are also troubling. They speak of free love, but the audience laughs at their naiveté and doesn't believe they mean it. With good reason: Beatty/Reed and Keaton/Bryant speak of non-monogamy but fight over jealousies and lovers ... not honestly trying to understand how they feel and why it is so difficult to be non-monogamous ...” — M. May, *Modern Times*

“Each is the other's cross to bear, without which neither would want to live. REDS suggests that the mystery of love resides in its inherent masochism.” — O'Toole, *MacLean's*

“[Lovers for awhile] in the late seventies, Diane Keaton and Beatty ... drifted apart during the making of REDS as Beatty lost sight of everything except the film (Reed and Bryant's marriage is constantly jeopardized by his passionate involvement with the radical cause).” — Thompson, *California*

“Early in his sickness I asked him to promise me that he would rest before going home since it only meant going to prison. I felt prison would be too much for him. I remember he looked at me in a strange way and said, ‘My dear little Honey, I would do anything I could for you, but don't ask me to be a coward.’ I had not meant it so. I felt so hurt that I burst into tears and said he could go and I would go with him anywhere by the next train, to any death, or any suffering. He smiled so happily then.” — Louise Bryant, letter to Max Eastman

“The appellation Red, long a term of abuse for anyone suspected of harbouring critical views about the status quo, has a different sense for me than its usual meaning of Left with a capital L, Ladies-make-the-

coffee-and-men-make-politics sort of slant. In the movie REDS, there's a scene where producer-director-star Warren Beatty ... heads for the toilet in a crowded jail cell filled with other activists and more 'common' outlaws. Beatty's face expresses pain and bewilderment; an old geezer looks over his shoulder; we see a close up of the toilet bowl; then the old geezer says, 'This one even pisses red.' Laughter. Meaning: in his tireless crusade for justice, John Reed is about to lose a kidney. But he will persevere, in spite of government persecution, dissension in the left, and desertion by his wife because of his infidelity. I am reminded of a T-shirt I've coveted on other women. It has a beautiful batik design of red on purple, and lettering which says: 'I am Woman. I can bleed for days and not die.' When Louise Bryant, Reed's colleague, lover, wife, is trekking through Finland on skis trying to find Reed and get him out of prison (an episode almost entirely fictionalized by the film and milked for its romantic interest), I wondered what she did when she got her period. The film didn't enlighten me." — Martineau, *Broadside*

## THE WITNESSES

*American Film* identified all the interviewees, but after everyone had a chance to guess.

"For the best part of two years, he and his cinematographer, Vittorio Storaro (1900 and APOCALYPSE NOW) collected the memories of other veterans of the period — so many of them dead before the movie opened. Thirty-two witnesses appear in the picture, but Beatty filmed many more — some interviews as long as two hours. This material is a documentary treasure that any archive would envy." — Thompson, *California*

"... 'witnesses'... who were contemporaries of Reed and Bryant, reminisce about them, often vaguely ... These old, wrinkled, 'real' people are like ghosts recalled from the past, speaking with authority about the texture of their times, their voice-overs become a narrative device, keeping the complex story lucid throughout. They can't tell us much about Reed and Bryant, other than 'they were a couple,' so it is left to Beatty to imaginatively create their private world." — O'Toole, *MacLean's*

But whether or not by design — nothing in this crafted, crafty film happens by accident — the men and women speaking are never identified (and, toward the end, become mere voice-overs). The result is deliberately confusing, not to say obfuscatory, and it succeeds in putting some good people in a very poor light. Hamilton Fish apparently spent a lifetime fighting Reds without ever learning how to produce the word 'Communist,' while the oldsters — who in their salad days and long afterward were well worth listening to — come off as doddering and unsure." — Beliberg, *Barron's*

“These witnesses ... are so uniformly captivating that Beatty's decision not to identify them while they are on screen is terribly frustrating. Despite this their presence serves a double purpose: they pique our interest by grounding the film in an engaging historical reality, and, more cleverly, because their recollections are often sketchy they point up the tenuousness and uncertainty of history, in effect — excusing Beatty in advance for the minor liberties he has taken with the facts.” — Turan, *California*

“They are narrators, and vocally in close-ups, as they remember the times being shown visually, they comment. A fascinating technique to facilitate the movement of time, and personal remembrances ...” — Cole, *People's World*

“Beatty's shrewd and artistically brilliant use of a "chorus" of aged real-life "witnesses" also acts to lend distance from the political present. The various speakers are contradictory ... The overall effect is to fix the events in a distant, dimly if at all remembered past.” — Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*

“Beatty also uses the brilliant device of interrupting his story with interviews with real ‘witnesses,’ still alive today ... The effect, as in a Brecht play, is to prevent the audience from getting too involved in the film as fantasy — reminding them. This is the story of real people.” — Michaelson and Rosenbaum, *Unity*

“To say that it is a ‘distanciation’ device would be to give it too grand a name, but there's a way in which you are made aware that you're watching a construction, because here are these historical figures who lived in the period, and knew the people; I thought it was effective in countering some of the distortions in the film. We realize that ‘truth’ is hard to come by. — Kaplan, *Socialist Review*

## ZINOVIEV

Perhaps the most symptomatic element of the REDS reviews was the critics' repeated return to the question: Who was Zinoviev?

“In Moscow Reed comes into direct conflict with the leader of the Comintern, Zinoviev, a rigid authoritarian, who gives orders, and will not brook interference. (Zinoviev was purged from the Party 15 years later.) — Cole, *People's World*

"Are the major characters in the movie Bill Haywood, communists and socialists? No. They are: ... Grigory Zinoviev, a Bolshevik who opposed the party's decision to begin armed insurrection (Lenin called him a scab for that), who in 1925 organized the Trotskyist "New Opposition" and was expelled from the party in 1934 (Zinoviev is played by the well-known Polish anticommunist writer Jerzy Kozinski, a lover of U.S.

imperialism); ..." — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

"It is with the figure of Zinoviev, sharply insisting on the party's monopoly on truth, that Beatty does make some concessions to anticommunist stereotype. Yet as Reed's desire to return home by the holidays is portrayed in the film, in the midst of the Russian Civil War, we do not find Zinoviev's sharp and angry objections to this powerful propagandist's taking off to be out of line." — Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*

"Zinoviev was a leading member of the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International. In the 1930s he and many others were framed up by Stalin and executed as 'Nazi agents.' In one scene, Zinoviev argues with Reed, who wants to return home, assertedly because of a personal commitment he made to Louise Bryant. Zinoviev argues, in a seemingly heartless way, that Reed is urgently needed in Moscow for the important political work he is doing. While the actor who plays Zinoviev delivers the lines in a harsh, alienating way, what Zinoviev is portrayed as telling Reed is not unreasonable. You can always return to your personal responsibilities, Zinoviev says, but never to this moment in history." — Ring, *The Militant*

"The characterization of Soviet Communist Zinoviev as a Marxist Darth Vader, giving ominous speeches to John Reed about how he must choose between his family and revolution, only serves to frighten the audience. In fact, all successful revolutions have built on people's love of their families and their willingness to make sacrifices precisely to make a better world for their children." — Michaelson and Rosenbaum, *Unity*

My identification is always with the Reed character, of course, as opposed to Zinoviev. Zinoviev and Radek seem to be relatively accurate portraits. Stalin ultimately killed them in an interesting historical twist; those great bureaucrats were ultimately murdered as Trotskyist and Bukharinite oppositions." — Quart, *Socialist Review*

"Zinoviev becomes the film's cynical example of a party leader: opportunist, unfeeling, manipulating and dogmatic — the Hollywood-capitalist image of a good communist. The historical fact is that Zinoviev was a renegade: when he translated Reed's speech to the Oriental Congress, he changed the original words 'class war' to 'jihad' — holy war. That was the traitor's political idea, not the idea of the Third International. Reed attacked Zinoviev for his treachery, though the film portrayal of this is primarily individualistic — don't change anything that I write — not political." — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

"The whole Baku Conference is falsified. The racist portrayal of the Babel of voices is taken from *The Lost Revolutionary* by Richard O'Connor and Dale Walker (O'Connor wrote the 'Bat Masterson' TV series of 20 years ago, which made a hero of a homicidal pimp), who got

it in turn from Robert Dunn, a U.S. government spy who never got nearer the conference than Constantinople and didn't write until 1959. Zinoviev's speech (which called for, among other things, a 'holy war against robbers and oppressors') is cynically portrayed as a translation of Reed's; in fact, Reed's own speech was about American workers' exploitation. Reed never told Zinoviev, 'Don't rewrite what I write!' This is put in to balance the similar scene at the beginning of the film with Grant Hovey, editor of the bourgeois *Metropolitan* magazine." — A New Jersey Comrade, *Challenge*

"The scene is a racist slander, trying to build up pro-war hysteria against Arabs and Iranians ... The movie ... slanders Zinoviev. Zinoviev and Reed actually put forward the same line at the Congress: workers and peasants in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East should reject alliances with the local bosses and should fight for socialist soviets on the Russian model. This was a very advanced line, which the Communist International later retreated from (at Lenin's insistence). I think that in this case they were to the left of Lenin and they had a better line ... We shouldn't be so quick to assume that the communist movement in the past was infected by bad ideas like nationalism. The problem was Beatty's lies, not Zinoviev's." — A Reader, *Challenge*

"REDS is accurate in pointing out the demagogic aspects of the Baku Congress of Peoples of the East in 1920. Zinoviev did indeed call for an Islamic 'jihad' (holy war). This call for religious holy war was an aberration of Communist International (Comintern) policy toward the colonial regions. Surely Beatty was reflecting on Khomeini's Iran as many reformist organizations hailed Khomeini's mullah 'jihad' in part on the authority of the Baku Congress. But Reed was right ..." — Kincaid, *Worker's Vanguard*

"There is even less basis in fact for the scene in which Reed angrily assails Zinoviev for making a change in translation of Reed's speech at the Baku conference ... Actually Reed, along with numerous others of the invited speakers, never got to make his speech at Baku. He did give a very brief greeting, but his speech was simply included in the official proceedings of the conference. Neither his greetings nor his speech ... include the phrase 'class war' or 'holy war.'" — Ring, *The Militant*

"When Reed discovers what has occurred, he engages Zinoviev in a shouting match — a replay actually of an earlier scene in which a bourgeois editor has altered Reed's copy without permission. While Zinoviev ridicules Reed's 'individualism' and justifies the change on the grounds of political expediency, Reed argues that dissent is the essence of revolution. Taken as a unity — as indeed they must be — the two scenes register REDS' essential message: revolution is the struggle against authority in general and there is little distinction between the tyranny of capitalist wealth and the autocracy of communist power. In

fact, if anything, the latter is more absolute and, therefore, more oppressive. The communists are such cynical manipulators, in fact, that they will readily abandon their own well-known atheism and play into religious sentiments in seeking immediate advantages.”

“It protects itself from going overboard politically; it finally ends with a level of disenchantment with the revolution. It does ask questions about political commitment yet it does not put down political commitment, because Reed is an extremely attractive figure. It asks a number of questions about the nature of political commitment — the self-destructive quality, the level of betrayal which Goldman brings out, that is the betrayal of one's ideals when revolution takes form — questions to me that are real.” — Quart, *Socialist Review*

## LEFT FILM ANALYSIS

Based on our sampling it seems accurate to say that most left film discussion leaves a lot to be desired. By and large it falls into the familiar pattern of claiming the film has a single universal meaning, which the critic has discovered through superior political and cinematic acumen. By virtue of embracing Scientific Socialism, the critic has a pipeline to Truth. The critic declares an interpretation and "proves" it through a variety of non-analytical, rhetorical devices. For example, the reviewers introduce contradictory aspects of Warren Beatty's star image to buttress whatever argument is at hand: dissolute playboy or Hollywood left-liberal.

Such a strategy leaves little room for difference, for diverging views, for contradiction. It tends to leave a lot of room for inflating the critic's ego, for shooting from the hip, and for collapsing personal response into political analysis: I liked it, therefore it's politically correct, or vice versa. Such dogmatism from the reviewer tends to provoke an equally dogmatic response from the readers (This reviewer is full of shit!) or else humiliation (Gee, I didn't see that, I guess I'm really stupid). An alternative to slug-it-out dogmatism, Barbara Halpern Martineau's review, asserts a feminist norm to interrogate the film's patriarchal form and content. In the larger context of patriarchal film critical discourse, such a strategy becomes sly, witty and subversive.

As editors, we face the same problems in considering reviews for JUMP CUT. Because the dominant forms of journalistic reviewing are built on assumptions of imminent meaning and the critic as privileged perceiver, we often find left film reviewers repeating the same pattern. Yet, we'd argue, that's just not enough for an adequate Marxist analysis, for it misses an essential prior question: What is the nature and effect of cinema as an institution? As long as left film reviewers assume that it's more important to have the correct line on Zinoviev than to understand how a film functions in reproducing ideology, left cultural politics will be fundamentally reactionary and mystifying — a mirror of the right wing's

cultural critiques.

“A great piece of Communist propaganda, with a cast of thousands, brought to your neighborhood screen by Paramount Pictures a ‘Gulf + Western company.’” — Blieberg, *Barron's*

“The movie is directed primarily towards intellectuals and students who would be attracted to revolution in this period of developing war and fascism. The similarities of the present period and the time in which Reed developed his communist consciousness are great and the ruling class is out to create cynicism among this section of the population.” — A Detroit Comrade, *Challenge*

While few left film critics veered so far into conspiracy theories, most saw REDS as propagating a simple message. It was rare to find anyone trying to discuss the film's diverse appeal.

“It has, as it were, something for everyone: A Revolution for the Left, disillusionment for the Right, continued idealism for the romantic and for the emotional, a love that spans continents and oceans.” — N.R., *Modern Times*

We think a review should be a site of investigation, a way to provoke thought and educate readers about the world and culture around them. But the left discussions of REDS showed virtually no interest in or awareness of such basic questions as these: How did the general audience, unschooled in left debates, relate to the film? How did REDS function as entertainment? How do the star images of Keaton and Beatty affect viewers' perception of the film? What does the film convey about history and the nature of personal and political change, and how does it use images to do so? How does the film use its romanticism and dramatization of events and people?

The left seems to have little awareness of the contradictory forces at work in a major Hollywood film — the influence of finance and the market, the force of genre and narrative, the collective production process, and divergent audience responses. Yet without more complete and sophisticated analyses, critics can offer only fundamentally idiosyncratic and subjective judgments. The left does not settle for that in essays on economics, the state, and labor unions. How much longer will it accept subjective impressions as the basis for evaluating Hollywood?